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ABSTRACT

A study investigated cognitive, social, and psychological aspects of language and literacy among five young adult Ethiopian students who had emigrated to Israel. The subjects were four males and one female aged 18-25, enrolled in an Israeli university's pre-academic program. All had come to Israel a number of years previously, when their government was changing. Personal interviews with each student consisted of over 70 questions and sought personal opinions as well as factual information. Results indicate that the students were beginning to be aware of, and had deep feelings about, language loss and the inadequacy of their skills in any single language: English, Hebrew, Amharic, or Tigre. Language loss was experienced at home as well as in pursuit of higher education. Family communication was seen as deteriorating. It is noted that language maintenance materials and programs for Amharic and Tigre do not exist, and that little opportunity to express or explore these feelings of loss is available to this population. Further, it is suggested that this situation may represent a form of subtractive bilingualism, and that this population should be provided with better opportunities to develop higher-order cognitive skills for advanced education. (MSE)

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COULD THESE BE LANGUAGE DISPLACED PEOPLE IN TRANSIT? REFLECTIONS ON LANGUAGE/LITERACY INTERVIEWS WITH ETHIOPIANS.

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ED 364 074

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The special problems of the Ethiopian population in the Israeli educational system have been of interest to language teachers for several years. To better understand these problems, their origins and ramifications, a guided questionnaire was piloted at the pre-academic English unit at Haifa University in May, 1993. The questionnaire provided the framework of in-depth personal one-to-one interviews. This questionnaire comprised 72 main questions; many questions had subquestions yielding a total of about 100 questions in all.
In the course of the interviews, students were encouraged to comment, provide opinions and personal contributions as well as describe feelings. Since the questionnaire was structured and the metalanguage to reflect on language was introduced and explained, interviewees were better able to articulate their feelings and thoughts about their literacy backgrounds and language use, reading strategies and behaviors.

The interviewees were 5 Ethiopian students, 4 males and 1 female, studying in the pre-academic unit of Haifa University. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 and they had arrived in the country between 1981-1985. The interviews were conducted orally in Hebrew to ensure that the students fully understood the questions and their implications.

In order to establish a consistent pattern of interviewing, the first interview was conducted by the researchers together. All the interviews were between one and a half and two hours long. The interviews covered cognitive, social and psychological aspects

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of literacy and language use. In this progress report we will briefly reflect on the transitory language displacement these people seem to be experiencing.

Before expanding on our data, we must keep in mind that the sample is small, limited and not random, and therefore is not generalizable. However, the richness and abundance of data collected during these interviews motivated us to make a preliminary attempt at understanding the unique situation and problems of this population.

In the Collins English (1967) dictionary "displaced person" is defined as a person forced from his home or country, especially by war or revolution. In the Random House dictionary (1966) a "displaced person" is a person driven or expelled from his homeland by war or tyranny.

Although the term displaced person does not accurately capture the Ethiopian experience, it should be remembered that Israeli Ethiopian immigrants left Ethiopia when the government was changing, fearing that they might not be granted permission to emigrate unless they left immediately. Therefore, in strict political terms, these are not displaced persons. However, in linguistic terms, the younger generation may very well be temporarily linguistically displaced people who are losing their first language before having mastered a second one. It is this aspect of their transitory state that we would like to report on.

As indicated above, the younger generation may very well be temporarily linguistically and possibly also culturally displaced people who being cut off from their native language and culture, are losing their original sociolinguistic identity before having completed the process of linguistic and cultural integration and

internalization of the new local setting. In other words, they may be in a state of anomie, misfits in their parents' native Ethiopian culture while at the same time not yet integrated in the new linguistic and cultural setting.

It was during the interviews that both parties became aware of the interviewees developing and unfolding insight as to their deep feelings of language loss. This was manifested in the change in tone and the growing nostalgia as they spoke about the loss of their mother-tongues and the fact that they will not be able to converse with their own children in any language other than Hebrew. It was also evident in their awareness that they do not know any language really well. In English studies they translate to Hebrew, but cannot translate to Amharic or Tigre when the Hebrew is not understood or is insufficient.

In answer to a question related to their perception of their language proficiencies, all but one interviewee reported that they felt the gradual loss of their first language both at home and in pursuit of higher education. There was distress over the breakdown of communication in the family; that is, the younger and older generations no longer really share a language to communicate in verbally resulting in a need to resort to gestures to get messages across. There were reports of the use of Hebrew in speaking to parents and the use of the native language by parents to children.

Below are some quotations to illustrate the above points. These quotations have been translated from the original Hebrew:

a. ... don't want to forget language. It's a background. I also wanted to improve speech. You don't use a language, it weakens. Amharic

collides with Hebrew. (I) mix languages. At home we speak Amharic. I feel I am forgetting Amharic. I would like one or two lessons in Amharic.

b. ...Reading in Amharic gets me nervous. (I) don't understand much. I try to read. Father conducts competitions who reads well. I am upset that I forgot... (I) don't do much in Amharic. I shouldn't have forgotten Amharic. The questionnaire makes me think. It gives me the feeling that I do not want to forget Amharic.

c. ...During vacation with my parents, I use Amharic. At home we speak Amharic. I put in many words in Hebrew.

d. ...I have nearly forgotten Tigre. It bothers me very much because I will get married and have children and they will not be able to speak an Ethiopian language. With my mother I speak Hebrew and she answers me in Ethiopian. I understand her. When she doesn't understand me, I use my hands.

e. ...Friends look up words in an English in English-Hebrew dictionary and they do not understand the Hebrew, and then they look up the words in Amharic. They need three languages. The meaning of a word I did not understand.

f. ...to explain a word in Hebrew, in English, and I do not understand,- not in Hebrew, not in English and not in Amharic.

g....If I think in Hebrew, I get stuck. It's all a question of time. There is no time to translate into Amharic.

h. ...I remember things from the past. Nobody has asked me these questions. It makes me think about what I am doing.

The process of integration and internalization of the new sociolinguistic setting comprises many aspects. One aspect which

emerged in the course of the interviews is how we as both researchers and educators perceive and relate to some specific immigrant student populations. It became clear to us that we, the educators in the new culture and society, have not given these new immigrants from a society and language so different from our own, the opportunity to express and share their thoughts and feelings. There are no language maintenance programs or libraries carrying books in Amharic or Tigre, in spite of the feelings of language deprivation and the need for and desire for such maintenance programs. Further, more than one interviewee remarked that this was the first time anyone had shown a genuine interest in their personal histories and life stories.

From a sociolinguistic point of view, the interview situation created a four-way looking glass of society in which the interviewees were able to: 1) observe themselves internally; 2) reflect on society and their perception of society; 3) reflect on how society sees them; and 4) the interviewers were enabled to more clearly see the message Israeli society is sending to this particular population. Could this implicit sociolinguistic message be that different languages have different statuses, and hence the value of bilingualism is determined by 'which' languages you are bilingual in. To put it bluntly, some first languages and cultures are recognized as assets and efforts are made to maintain them. However, others are expected to be replaced as quickly as possible. Could this be a classic example of Jim Cummins' subtractive bilingualism? Another implied aspect of this message seems to be that for purposes of social integration and economic advancement, it may be detrimental to preserve certain first languages and cultures - especially at the expense of Hebrew and/or English. Might this not be enhancing and further aggravating the sociolinguistic displacement and

anomie, thus possibly expanding the period of being linguistically and culturally "in transit"?

We would like to conclude this report with a quotation from Bilingual Basics (Summer/Fall 1993) by Irma Guadarrama which addresses a misconception which many bilingual educators hold and which underscores the effect that first language loss might have on the development of higher level thinking skills:

> 'Students must learn English as quickly as possible, even if it means the loss of the native language'. Teachers who hold this view use native language instruction only when absolutely necessary. This is evident by the amount of time spent in English language instructionand the lack of quality materials in the native language available to students. The majority of teachers on a campus may have this view of bilingual education, thus adding validity to it. There may be only a few teachers who believe that students should be taught in their native language until they have mastered high level thinking skills, and believe that English language instruction should be gradual and 'sheltered.' But for many students, the transition is premature. Instead of focusing on the development of higher level thinking skills in the native language, students are shifted to an English language curriculum requiring a high level of English proficiency.

This seems to be applicable to the Ethiopians with the difference being that the language is Hebrew and not English. It is our responsibility to supply them with the necessary conditions to develop higher order thinking skills for advanced education if they are to close the educational, linguistic, economical and social gap.